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THE

IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS RESERVE,

AND THE

TEACHING OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

UPON

Confession and Absolution.

THREE SERMONS

PREACHED IN THE

CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE APOSTLE,

BY

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1878.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

Montreal :

PRINTED BY JOHN LOVELL, 23 & 25 ST. NICHOLAS STREET.

1873.

THE FOLLOWING
SERMONS
ARE INSCRIBED
TO THE
CHURCHWARDENS AND CONGREGATION
OF THE
CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE APOSTLE,
WITH SENTIMENTS
OF
EVER INCREASING KINDNESS
AND REGARD.

PREFACE.

THE kind solicitations of friends who heard the following sermons, and who desired to possess a copy, have induced me to lay them before the public. I have been the more inclined to take this course, because their object and teaching have not been clearly understood in all quarters, and I am reluctant to be misunderstood on so important a point. There is a growing danger lest the extravagancies which mar the labours of one school in our Church, may bring about the worst and most injurious schism which England has experienced.

Under these circumstances, every loyal Churchman should know and submit to the teaching of his Church. With this view, I prepared these sermons solely for the information of my own congregation, and I print them almost verbatim as they were preached. I have not encumbered the text with foot notes, but desire here to mention that my principal authorities have been the learned Bingham, Jewel, Riddle's Christian Antiquities, Hooker, the Biblical Dictionary, the Dictionary of Greek and Latin Biography, the Dictionary of Theology, Proctor and others on the Prayer-Book, any of the fathers whose works I possess, and any modern commentators who have treated of the matter.

R. W. N.

October, 1873.

SERMON I.

St. Matt. 6 c., part of 3rd v. "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth."

These words, as you know, form part of the golden treasury of Divine precepts, which we call the "Sermon on the Mount." Their immediate connection was with the subject of Alms giving. Our Saviour had said, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be seen of men." What is meant is, I presume, that these rich hypocrites contrived that men should see their deeds, observe them, comment upon them; that they made them as public as possible, so that they were, as it were, looked for, ushered in like some great personage in a procession.

The same avoidance of ostentation in Alms giving is impressed also in connection with Prayer and Fasting, and you will, I think, observe the great solemnity with which our Lord drives these words home. He says of the hypocrites, "Verily I say unto you, they have their reward." Their recompense is the praise and approbation of men; that they gain, but they have no reward of their Father in Heaven. "But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret, Himself shall reward thee openly." Again, the Lord says: "When thou prayest, thou shall not be as the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. They have their reward, for men count them holy and religious, and admire

them. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Notice, how precise is the injunction, first go into thy closet, then shut the door, then pray. "Once more when ye fast (said the Lord) be not, as the hypocrites of a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." In other words, that Christian men, when they practice self-denial, are to be cheerful, and are not to blazon forth the fact by a sour, prim and puritanical aspect. It must be plain to all of us that Christ wished us to pay most strict attention to these precepts. The very repetition gives weight to His enjoining on us, not merely an absence of ostentation in our religion, but a positive reserve. "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." Our members are part of ourselves, yet what one did was, so to speak, to be unknown to another, *i. e.*, that people in general, and perhaps even our closest and most bosom friends, had best not know the inmost secrets of our religious aspirations. Let us attentively see why.

Religious life soon loses its pure standard and high singleness of purpose, when it comes much in contact with men, and becomes public property. The deepest prayer, the strictest self-denial, the most earnest stretching forth of the soul unto God, must be in secret, only known to Him, remembered by Him, and written down in His book. There is no one who tries to lead a Christian life, who has not had moments when he realised God's presence, when he felt himself truly an heir of heaven, when the immortality and future of the soul seemed to be open before him, when earth and its pleasures were for a while forgotten. Would he talk about such few and precious

moments? Would he print them in a pamphlet, or send them to a newspaper? Would they not be soiled and tarnished if they were conversed about? Such a thing reminds me of the desecration of churches at the Reformation, when the sacred books illuminated and gorgeously bound were put to all sorts of ignoble uses by ignorant soldiers.

It would be abhorrent to any rightly constituted mind, to feel that its most private thoughts could be confided to others, and perhaps made the subject of light conversation and jesting. Also the very publicity would impair the acceptableness of such thoughts, and would distract them from their original object. In such a case, the first result would be that people would become what is called self-conscious, and self-consciousness is very often the parent of vanity and conceit. Self-consciousness is one of the great snares which beset the clergy, from the fact that so much of their devotional life is in public. If a person were in the habit of going through some course of prayers, or were to do some very charitable and self denying act in public, and so as to attract the attention of a very large number of men, he would naturally begin to think, *i. e.*, the Devil would put the thought in his heart—"I wonder what people think of me. Did they remark the fervour of my prayer, the largeness of my charity, the saintliness of my life? What do they say of me, if they converse on the subject at all?" Notice next the results which would follow. A person who allows these thoughts to steal into his mind will often be thinking that others are watching him. The idea will come into his thoughts like cross paths which bewilder a traveller, and draw him off from the main road. There will no longer be the uninterrupted flowing onward of the soul to God, no longer the craving for Him and disregard of all else. This is one of several reasons why it is so undesirable for people to be ostentatious in their devotion, singular in their attitudes and demeanour when engaged in public worship. The second result is that some one conscious of the observation of men, will regulate his actions accordingly, will think how he

will attract, and how he will best secure respect, admiration, love or gratitude ; and to say the least, his actions, words and thoughts will lose their singleness of purpose and purity of character. Instead of being done for God, and existing only for Him, they will be done also for men. And so I say that self-consciousness, that baleful tendency, will be the parent of vanity. At length by slow degrees, a person would act to be seen of men, and to gain popular applause. A veil would then be thickening between his soul and its God, and his acts would become valueless.

It is very hard for any one, whose life is very public, to avoid thinking of what estimation men will hold him in, and whether they will praise or condemn him. It would be next to impossible for any one to reveal the depths of his relations with God, of his communings with his Maker in times of solitude, without measuring such things by the world's standard, and trying to gain *its* approval. Thus it is a snare to a man to give publicly large subscriptions to charities. He may perhaps build a church or an hospital. He will be spoken of in newspapers as charitable, generous, munificent. There are very few to whom this does not give pleasure, and who, if they do not take especial care, will not be damaged by it. There are very few who, when they have been remarked on as being benevolent, will not do some act of the same kind to keep up their character. Publicity at times is unavoidable and even necessary, but people should beware lest all their alms and good deeds should be the talk of men. Let them keep back their best, their first fruits of sacrifice for God's eye only, and let them, by watchfulness and self-sacrifice, guard against any injury to their singleheartedness. From fear of this risk, really devout people often give sums anonymously to charities, in order that they may be the means of doing good, and yet be unknown to men. In this present age there is no doubt a real spirit of alms giving for the love of God and not the praise of men. But in this age there is also much of what may be called religious gossip. There are unfortunately parties in the Church,

and those who belong to one section are only too apt to speak ill of and find fault with those who differ from them. This is much to be lamented. It mars the spirit of love and good will. It increases divisions, and promotes stubborn, obstinate self conceit. Religion's sacred name has in former days been used to account for and justify some of the most barbarous acts that have ever been perpetrated. And religious gossip is the worst form of all gossip, and helps to foster a real spirit of irreverence. Also besides the tendency, so common now, to run down people who do not hold exactly what we do, there is also the tendency to talk of our religious feelings, because we often speak of our religious views. One follows the other. This is much to be guarded against.

Every one should mistrust himself, if he finds himself disposed to talk much of his religious feelings. A stream, which covers a wide surface, cannot as a rule be deep and full, and if any one be addicted to converse upon his love to God and hopes of Heaven, I do not fancy that such sentiments would be very deep-rooted or stable. It is wonderfully easy to get into a sort of sensational style of religious talk, to adopt insensibly a set-tone of voice, a number of special phrases, a sort of jargon, when we speak of our ideas upon the greatest of all subjects, the relations between the Almighty God of Heaven and the immortal soul which He has made and sanctified. But to parade our ideas about our souls, their present state and their future hope, though done almost unconsciously, is likely to beget self-satisfaction and even hypocrisy. It must injure our humility and real dependence on God. It would be like taking some beautiful, delicate, fragile white robe, and handing it round to a mob of filthy men, to be examined and fingered by them. That robe would be returned to its owner, torn, defaced and defiled.

I have heard that, among some bodies of Christians who dissent from our Church, young men, almost boys, and young girls, are permitted, nay invited, to relate and ex-

patiate upon their religious experiences before an assembly of people. If this be true, there can be scarcely anything more likely to engender vanity, unreality, real ignorance of self and confusion of religion with religious feelings. This is not all. It would tend to produce real forgetfulness of God. It would make the approbation of listening men the test of religious life, and superinduce the temptation to invent experiences in order to secure prominent attention. How unlike this is to the sensitive shrinking from public gaze, of the truly religious mind. How destructive to the modest humility proper to youth. How dangerous to the advance in good, which ought to mark the real Christian life. Our deepest sentiments seem only fit to be whispered on our knees, and poured forth thus into the ear of a listening God.

I believe that reserve on religious subjects is a national characteristic of the country where the English language is spoken. I believe, also, that such reserve is a healthy sign. Much religious profession is rather to be mistrusted. Religion grows slowly, it is then the more likely to be vigorous and lasting, and it is seen more in acts than words. And though some may yearn for some sympathetic friend with whom they can discourse, and yearn without being gratified, yet even this deprivation may be wholesome. Much of this craving may be morbid and sickly, and if encouraged, may emasculate the true vigour of the soul. To use the words of another, the stream which cannot overflow may become all the deeper, and may penetrate more into the structure of such a person's nature; he may be led to incorporate his religion more into himself, and hold it all the more firmly. It is to guard this holy, natural, and healthy reserve that our Church has expressed herself with so much caution upon the subject of Confession. She refrains in any way from pressing it upon her members as a natural, regular, or necessary practice. She rather invites them to confess their sins and infirmities to God. This subject is a matter of much debate

at the present time, and I purpose to treat of it at an early opportunity. My remarks of this morning I will ask you to look upon in the light of a preamble.

We should notice, lastly, that our Lord's words, and the conclusion which I have drawn from them, are no recommendation for us to keep back our faith from men. The warning against ostentation in prayer, almsgiving or self-denial does not imply that we should be ashamed of performing these very obvious Christian duties. There is no contradiction between the text and such passages as the following: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid—neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light to all them that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your father which is in Heaven." Rather, this reserve in our religious words and acts, this absence of parade, this retiring humbleness, are quite compatible with a thorough unflinching confession of faith in God when the occasion arises. This reserve is found joined with a firm yet quiet attitude in these days of religious controversy. It is found coupled with a steady consistent upholding of the one faith given to the Christian—the faith in Christ crucified, and an unswerving adherence to the principles of the Church. The reserve which our Lord put before us, agrees with the convictions of those who have thought the most and prayed the most. We are not to be ashamed of Christ and His truth; but the more we prize it and dwell on it, the more shall we feel that He gave it us to show forth more in our lives than with our lips, and that our most cherished feelings mostly belong to our communion with our Heavenly Father; that they are beyond words, and cannot be spoken of without sustaining loss and change.

In this age of much talk, when there are innumerable religious newspapers, periodicals, and hot controversies going on, it is refreshing to turn to the life of some saint of God, whose life flowed on in an even

quiet current, fertilizing all those who approached him, whose character was more and more likened to the Divine pattern, and yet whose life was hid with Christ. Such persons have I known who during their lives have been thought by some, cold, hard, proud, shy. This is a great trial, but it is better to have to bear it than to sun oneself in the light of human popularity. It prevents us, also, from craving too much for human opinion. And if a person's nature is thoroughly interpenetrated by true religion, a light will at times break from him, showing to all around that God is with him.

Religion is the principle by which the spiritual life within us is fed. Hereafter, nothing that is secret shall not be manifest. Here many things must be secret. Our duty is to maintain a high standard, not to compromise in morals or religion, but not to be given to much speech about either, and above all to shun the slightest approach to courting the good opinion of men. Be afraid of human praise. Think rather of the things in which you offend than those in which you do well. As says an old writer: "Desire to be a Christian, not to be thought one." Self-consciousness destroys much good promise. To fear, to love God, and to do always what is right will be the best safeguard. Leave the rest to God. He may, if you look to Him for strength, and strive only to please Him, make you an instrument for His glory. The righteous will one day shine forth as the sun, but their glory will not be in this life, it will be when their strife is over, in the kingdom of their Father which is in Heaven.

SERMON II.

James 5 c., 16 v. : " Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

It is not wise in these days of theological bitterness for either clergy or laity to cultivate to any great extent the controversial spirit. It rather serves to stiffen into more unbending rigidity the barrier that separates us from others, and to make re-union a more than ever hopeless contingency. But yet there are times, when it is necessary to speak out with no hesitating accents, and when silence might be damaging to the cause of truth. It is this consideration, that has determined me to lay before you to-day my views on the subject of Confession. I can truly say that my convictions have not been formed hastily. They are the result, at all events, of twenty years' honest thought, and the opinions which I held, of course, somewhat immaturity on first entering the ministry, while they have been modified in some points, have in others deepened and strengthened by time, study and intercourse with my fellowmen, whether clergy or otherwise. Of course, my views as a private individual possess no importance whatever. They only become of consequence from the responsibility of my office, and relation to you. On first joining this church, I expressed a strong hope that a tie of confidence would bind us together. Those who know me well, whether on this or the other side of the Atlantic, are well acquainted with my religious convictions. But this knowledge cannot, of course, belong to all here, and I could scarcely bear at any time that any one should conceive my fearing to reveal my belief. But especially am I at this present juncture desirous to carry you with me, since for a while we are deprived of the pre-

sence of my friend and brother, the Incumbent of this church, and therefore increased responsibility devolves on myself.

But to turn to the matter before us. The theory and practice of confession has been brought into great prominence of late in England, and whatsoever affects the mother Church must sooner or later influence her daughter Churches. Moreover, confession is not a matter of merely abstract doctrine. It touches family life, and may be said to be a social as well as a religious question. It therefore seems to me right to show you what to my mind is clearly and unmistakeably the teaching, on this head, of the Church of England.

But first it is well for us to examine the doctrine of the primitive Church and also that of the modern Roman Church, on the subject of confession. You might say to me in objection, what is the use of entering on Roman Catholic teaching, when we are completely at variance with that Church in question on many points. True, but I wish you to notice how modern are all the peculiarities of Romanism. Also, I see, with regret, a tendency on the part of some in England, to approximate in phraseology to the usages of Rome with regard to those matters on which we believe Rome to be wrong, and also to approximate to her sometimes in deed as well as in word. Then, too, our Church herself appeals fearlessly to primitive antiquity. She bases her teaching and practice on that which has been transmitted to us from the earliest Apostolic times, and in matters of faith she refers us to Scripture as the final court of appeal.

Now, quite apart from social and moral objections, I assert that the teaching of the Church of Rome is on this point utterly unprimitive, and in ancient days was never heard of. She stands alone and apart from other Churches on the subject of confession. No other Church makes confession a necessary preliminary to the reception of the Holy Communion, or to a Christian death. Of course, if the mat-

ter before us were one merely of external ceremonies, no great importance need be attached to this fact. While truth, if it be truth, must be ever unchanged and unchangeable, its outer garb may vary. Every true system must be elastic, and must be able to adapt itself to the changing needs and circumstances of men. No church would be bound to carry out exactly the same ritual that was in use a thousand years ago. Discipline may be, and has been modified. Ecclesiastical machinery may change and has changed. Most notable changes have ensued with regard to public confession and public penance during the first thousand years of the Church's existence. But Rome far exceeds this legitimate liberty. She allows no one to communicate who has not first made a private confession. She has exalted confession itself into a sacrament, a tenet unknown to the primitive Church, and has declared that the Most High only as a rule forgives through the lips of the absolving priest. She has thus made confession compulsory for all who would enjoy full church privileges, and has enjoined confession once a year upon all who would desire to be held within the pale of the Church, and profit by her system.

If we turn to ancient Christendom, we find such teaching unknown for nearly 1200 years. The Lateran Council, in A.D. 1215, decreed, that all people should at the least once in a year confess their sins privately to a priest. Innocent 3rd then and there proclaimed it heresy for any man to assert that confession to God was sufficient, without private confession to a priest. But even subsequent to his time the custom was not by all deemed essential, and up to the period of the Reformation and the Council of Trent, it was considered as somewhat of a novelty by many.

In very early times ecclesiastical discipline was extremely strict. This was perhaps needful in times of persecution, when false, ungodly and immoral brethren would not only have weakened but corrupted the rising Church. In early days the best known form of confession was a public one.

Persons guilty of scandalous offences, and even of the intent to commit them, announced their guilt before the whole congregation. Such persons did not receive public absolution, till, after a course of severe penance and several stages of exclusion from communion, which lasted for years, they, with many tears, and at the intercession of others were publicly absolved by the Bishop, and were thereby readmitted to full communion. It was found after a while that such public avowals brought at times disgrace upon the Church, and subjected the confessing offender to danger of death. Therefore, an office was instituted in the Eastern Church, called that of the Penitentiary Priest.†

It was his business to receive the private confessions of those who offered them, and to advise as to whether such confessions should or should not be made public. He was also empowered to appoint private penance for certain sins. After a time this office was done away with by Nectarius, Archbishop of Constantinople. Every one, at the end of the fourth century was left free to act according to the dictates of his own conscience with reference to presenting himself at the Holy Table, a system, which I need scarcely remind you, emphatically that of the Church of England. I would pray you to notice that even in the early rigorous times, no one was compelled to make a public or private confession. Origen, in the third century, is the first Christian writer

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- * Such as: 1. The mourners.
2. The hearers.
3. The prostrators or kneelers.
4. The by-standers.
5. The penitents fully restored to communion.

† This practice was adopted also in the Latin Church and continued to the time of Leo the Great. He declared that every priest had authority to receive confession, and to declare forgiveness in God's name. But even subsequent to the age of Leo it was considered as the option of an offender to confess his sins to the priest or to God alone.

who mentions private confession at all. He states that persons, if necessary, chose with circumspection some one of the clergy to whom they might unburthen themselves when suffering from troubles of conscience, and who might help them himself by counsel and guidance, or refer them if need be to a higher court, with a view to public confession. To similar import others after him express themselves. The greatest writers, whose names all Christians respect, such men as Chrysostom, Gregory Nyssen, Basil, Hilary, Leo, Ambrose, Augustine, all testify that confession to God was sufficient.

At that period it was unmistakeably and unanimously declared by all religious teachers that God alone can remit sins; that all frail man can do is to receive a penitent sinner into church communion, and, judging by signs, to conclude that his repentance is sincere, and that God would forgive him. With that assurance, absolution was given in the name of God, but not until the discipline had been duly carried out, the perseverance in which was surely one proof of sincere repentance.

In the middle ages a stricter rule was observed, and confession was enforced on those who had been excommunicated, if they wished to be restored to communion. But still the practice was not made generally obligatory, nor was it habitual in other cases. And a long time passed before confession was laid down to be an absolute necessity for all who desired to be in a state of grace, and in the way of salvation. This was finally decreed by the Council of Trent.

Let us now examine the teaching of our own Church. She has gone back to primitive practice and has followed the guidance of Scripture. Among the Jews, a kind of confession existed which accompanied the sin offering. Confession of sin formed part of the very notion of repentance. Achan was by Joshua called on to repent and make confession of his sins to God, and at the same time to communicate them to Joshua. John the Bap-

tist revived the ancient practice, and we find that his converts were baptized in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Moreover, the commission given by our Lord to the Apostles promised at first to St. Peter and afterwards conferred on all, included the idea of confession of sins, either to or in the hearing of the Apostles, with the power of absolution. And as the Lord promised to be ever with His Church, and the Holy Ghost should abide with her, such ordinary powers as are necessary to her existence must still exist in the Church, or Christ's promise has failed. I do not, at present, purpose to explain what absolution is, since the doctrine must form the subject of another sermon, but desire simply to remind you, that our Church in her ordination of priests has used the words of the very ministerial commission, which our Lord employed when he ordained His Apostles, and that therefore the two occurrences are logically connected. But in the New Testament there is no mention of any rite corresponding to what is called sacramental confession. The words of the text imply nothing of the kind. They have been abandoned by most Roman Catholic commentators as useless, and as making nothing for their practice in this respect. St. James' words describe an act of brotherly and affectionate confession of light daily-occurring offences. Such a system might exist in a united Christian body, when the offences committed by one against another would be confided, and joint prayers would be offered up to God, the only source of forgiveness. Such a case of admission of errors, our Lord also contemplated, when he said "If thy brother trespass against thee seven times in a day and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent thou shalt forgive him." Similarly elsewhere, Matt. 5, c. 23 "First be reconciled to thy brother, then offer thy gift." We also find that the Ephesian converts "confessed and showed their deeds." But this was evidently a public proceeding. Thus no Scriptural warrant exists for the idea that confession is of vital necessity, or even of great consequence for the strengthening and purifying of the Christian soul.

In her regular service of morning and evening prayer our Church makes confession of sin precede praise and thanksgiving. She leads her children up to the truth which the Jews were right in maintaining so plainly, viz, that God alone can remit sins. In the general confession each one of us can keep in mind his own failings, can bear them up to God's throne, and then the Almighty's forgiveness, coming through the lips of His ministers, if it find the good soil of a penitent heart, will take root and blossom into peace. Our Church teaches us, that the general absolution pronounced in morning or evening prayer, or in the Communion Office, is just as valid and efficacious towards strength and encouragement, as any absolution uttered in private to one alone. All of us are thus urged to confess our sins daily to God, and to seek for His forgiveness in His appointed means. I need hardly tell you that God Himself needs no means, and that any one of us kneeling in the quiet seclusion of our own chamber at home, may, if he lift up his heart to his Maker in sincere repentance, receive forgiveness direct from Heaven. But that blessed certainty should not lead us to undervalue, still less to despise, whatever ordinances and channels of forgiveness God has appointed for our souls' health. We are also directed in our Church Catechism, as well as in the first exhortation in the Communion Office, to examine ourselves by the rule of God's commandments, with a view to the knowledge of our sins, and the confession of them to Him.

Thus the ordinary normal state of a Christian soul is supposed to be one in which no private confession to man is needed. Two exceptional conditions exist. One of these is alluded to in the Communion Office, the other in the Visitation of the sick. Often as these have been cited, it is needful to do so once more. The exhortation, after dwelling on the duty of self-examination and confession to God with a full purpose of amendment of life, and after speaking of sins which hinder worthy communion, goes on to say: "Because it is requisite that no man should come

to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience, therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me or to some other discreet and learned minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy word he may receive the benefit of absolution together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding all scruple and doubtfulness." If words have any definite meaning, these latter clauses can only refer to an exceptional case; when a person has a grief, *i. e.*, a burden on his conscience, which cannot be removed by the ordinary means of self-examination and confession to God. I am not now discussing what the Prayer-Book means by the expression "benefit of absolution," but merely call your attention to the fact that something like confession is here recommended.

Again, in the office for the Visitation of the sick, after that the minister has examined the sick person as to the questions of faith, repentance and charity, and has recommended him to relieve his mind by a settlement of all his earthly affairs, these words occur: "Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if (mark the if) he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which confession the priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it), after this sort," *i. e.*, in some form similar to the following.

I hope it is clear to all from the foregoing, since the Church has only recommended something akin to private confession under two conditions, and one at least of these instances on the supposition that other ordinary means fail in their effect, that she does not recommend it in all cases. Also that neither of these instances imply or suggest a minute enumeration of offences, and a dissection of the soul, but merely a confiding of a definite evil. It is surely not the intention of the Church that the practice of confession should be considered as binding on all, as desirable for

all, still less as periodical or compulsory. She does not regard the condition requiring such an unburthening of the soul as normal or natural. To hold confession to be a requisite preliminary to communion, as the Roman Church authoritatively teaches, and as some Anglicans seem to believe, is an entirely modern invention. There are instances in ancient times of censure being passed on clergy for granting absolution upon a simple private confession, because their conduct seemed to imply the misconception that human beings could pardon sin.

Furthermore, while in the First Prayer Book of Edward VI., the absolution appointed in the service for the sick was directed to be used in all private confession, this direction was struck out in 1552, and has never been re-inserted. This fact affords an additional testimony to the belief that the question of confession is left an open one to the conscience of every individual. Herein our Church manifests her wisdom, her consideration for all, and her primitive character. All clergy are not equally qualified to advise in such difficult matters, and therefore, people are permitted, if they see fit, instead of consulting their own parish clergyman, to seek some other who is discreet and learned, *i. e.*, able to distinguish cases of conscience, and to afford right guidance and counsel. What greater latitude of choice can any reasonable person demand?

The revelation of a secret sin in confession is a most bitter and violent remedy, perhaps needed at times, and then wholesome, though painful; just as potent medicines are required for certain diseases of the body, and an excruciating surgical operation may in the end save a life. But for every person labouring under every ailment, real or imaginary, to resort to violent drugs, would be no more illogical than for every Christian to be flying to confession, when he or she are examining their conscience. Disease, whether of mind or body, ought not to be our invariably settled condition, and therefore it is wiser and better for a Christian, if he can, to look to the Holy Spirit

given to us all, and by prayer, self-examination, and watchfulness to press onwards daily to God. The laying bare of our souls to men, as a common practice, would be apt to interfere with that closest of relations—that of those souls to God. It is likely to weaken the great and vital truth of individual responsibility. It inclines people to lean on others, to surrender their consciences to the keeping of others, to forget that no man may deliver his brother, and that to God we all stand or fall. It tends to impair strength of character, and vigorous determination to do right with God's help, which all should strive for. It tends, instead of developing self-government in people, and enabling them to learn how with the aid of Divine grace, to cure themselves, rather to turn them into machines.

Such evils do not exist in my fancy. I have seen them at work. They are in a minor degree the evils which are found in that which is almost the most unmitigatedly evil of all evil systems—I mean direction—as practised in the Church of Rome. Frequent confessions may suggest evil, as the Roman Confessional has suggested evil. They impair the pure, healthy reserve of the immortal soul. One,* to whom I owe almost all the good that may be in me, one too, who was gifted in a most remarkable degree with the power of guiding souls in difficulty, thus wrote of the Roman Confessional, that it was “a corruption of the truth; a searing iron to the conscience, a usurpation of man over God; a paralyzer of human energy; a poisonous suggester of evil.” May God preserve us from it, or anything like it. All true Churchmen would disclaim a following of Rome in this particular; but I, nevertheless, detect a move, perhaps an unconscious one, in that direction. I am thinking of the Church at home.

I need not speak at length of the injurious social results which increase in confession would be likely to introduce. It is a subject that touches many to the very quick. Such an in-

* Rev. William Sewell, D.D. See his “Year’s Sermons,” p. 405.

crease might bring about (I do not affirm that it must), estrangement in families. It might alienate father from daughter, diminish the confidence between husband and wife, and completely wreck the happiness of a home. It would probably produce consequences, mischievous not only to domestic happiness but even to real religion.

But a few words more. The petition of certain English clergymen to the effect, that a select number of clergy should receive Episcopal license for the office of Confessor, has called forth, as you know, much discussion, and kindled a considerable amount of excitement. It elicited a most wise, dignified, fatherly and large-minded debate from the Prelates of the Convocation of Canterbury. I most heartily concur with the general sentiments they expressed. If those aforesaid clergymen had petitioned that young inexperienced men should be prohibited from exercising difficult and dangerous functions, I would have gone with them, because I am confident that the mischief such persons may do might be enormous, and life-long in its effects. Moreover, in my opinion, our Church offers all that is needed. She has left her members free to go to whom they will for advice and consolation, and she need do no more.

Such was the prudent and temperate spirit that animated our Reformers, and some of the greatest names that adorn our calendar of post-Reformation divines. Of these I will only mention two, who are conspicuously known for their moderation. These are Richard Hooker and Bishop Jewel. The former writes thus of confession,* "That no opinion is held of its being unlawful and unprofitable, saving only for those inconveniences which the world hath by experience observed in it heretofore. And in regard thereof, the Church of England hath hitherto thought it the safer way to refer man's hidden crimes unto God and themselves only; howbeit not without special caution for the admission of such as come to the Holy Sacrament, and for the comfort of such as are ready to depart the world."

* Hooker, Book vi, p. 276.

And Bishop Jewel writes :* “As for private confession, abuses and errors apart, we condemn it not, but leave it at liberty.”

I hope next Sunday to conclude this whole matter. For the present I would only say to those here to-day who are firm members of England's Church, cling to her more and more loyally. The more you know of her, the more you will admire, love and reverence her. To those who may as yet scarcely consider themselves as thoroughly rooted in her system, I would say, let me assure you, that I almost daily learn something fresh of her wisdom and her many blessings. These become the more conspicuous, when any assault is made upon her strongholds, or when any well-intentioned would-be reformers propose to improve upon her system. There has been of late years, as you know, much talk about revision of the Scriptures, and the work is in actual progress. But I expect that what has been found before will be made clear again, viz., that very little emendation is attainable in the way of accuracy, while no possible change can better the grand archaic swing, the majestic eloquence, the sublime poetry, the vigorous Saxon of our English Bible. Similarly, many hands have been at work on the Prayer-Book. But after long and animated discussion, it has been pretty well proved that most alterations would be for the worse. Our book of Common Prayer is not perfection, but it is most admirable and most precious. May we not hope that this heritage arrived at so painfully in days gone by, may be preserved to us intact, and that nothing may be done to abridge the wise liberty granted to the Church of England. It will be a satisfaction to me to feel that I have been of service to any member of this congregation, and that I have afforded one more evidence of the Scriptural and primitive character of our Church. It will be a comfort, if I can hope that all will see more than ever the great truth that our Church, in all her ministrations, instructs us not to depend

* Jewel's Def. p. 156, ed. 1611.

upon an arm of flesh, but rather to live, if possible, with consciences pure from great sin, with hearts closely knit to Christ, daily pouring into His ear our weaknesses and our falls, drinking from His Holy Spirit strengthening aid, and in His Sacrament receiving refreshing grace to help us over the narrow way that leads to life eternal.

SERMON III.

St. Mark 2c., 7v. Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies ? Who can forgive sins but God only ?

We come to day to the second portion of our subject, viz. the doctrine of the Church with respect to Absolution. It is necessary to treat this carefully, in order to the full understanding of the whole matter, and it was impossible for me to do justice to such a theme in one discourse. It is obvious that the mass of people, who may practise private, or as it is sometimes called "auricular confession," do so because they fully believe that they receive a supernatural spiritual benefit. They do not practise it for the sake of merely imparting a confidence to another.

Some go to confession as if seeking an opiate or cordial to lull or stupefy the sufferings of conscience that will make themselves felt, and instead of rousing themselves to struggle desperately with their sin, prefer to find passing comfort in the voice of a human being, rather than in the voice of God in their hearts and the Word of God in His Scripture. These persons are in a highly perilous condition. Such a weakness is generally accompanied by a fatal evil, fostered, not cured by the abuse of confession. I have in my recollection such cases. The healthy growth of their souls was stunted and dwarfed. They were learning the lesson of formalism. They had very little moral sense, and their ideas of the true heinousness of sin were sorely confused. They seemed to think—at all events they acted as if they thought that, provided they periodically visited a clergyman and opened their hearts to him, the stimulus of his counsel and admonitions would stand in the stead of active persevering resistance. It was hard to awaken in such people the reality of the

exceeding wickedness of known and wilful sin. It was hard to teach them that every time they fell, after promising amendment, the Devil had greater hold, the conscience was drowsier and weaker, and that their shame at their sinfulness and deplorable feebleness of purpose, was fast subsiding into brazen indifference.

But it would be wrong and inaccurate to class all under this one category, and to pass a general sweeping censure upon every individual who upholds auricular confession as a regular practice, as if all and everyone of this way of thinking were unreal, or weak, or wanting in genuine tenderness of conscience. Many excellent people believe that confession ought to enter into every educational system connected with our Church, and that it is the only sure means of keeping out moral mischief and preserving purity. While I respect the earnestness and sincerity of these persons, I am entirely opposed to their opinions on this matter. When conducting education in England I never encouraged confession, nor received confession from any pupil.

But the question before us to day is this--what gain do people expect through coming to Confession? It is not merely for the sake of the guidance and direction which one skilled in soulmaladies might be able to supply. It is not only for the heart-searching, the possible shame at having to divulge the ulcers and stains of sin, and the discipline which may have to be endured. It is more. It is the hope of pardon for past sin, which if they are considered penitent, they hope to receive. And in this all agree, that God does and will forgive the repentent sinner. But what then is Absolution? Last Sunday we saw how the Church of Rome maintains that it is, as a rule, the only means of forgiveness vouchsafed by God. It is in her eyes a Sacrament, and the main value of Confession is suffered to consist in its forming part of the Sacrament of penance and its leading to priestly Absolution. But we can pass by this monstrous assertion, this tying God down to human instruments, this arbitrary and most modern dogma. Let us briefly see firstly the

teaching of the Scriptures ; secondly that of the ancient church, and the witness of our own.

Doubtless our Lord's commission to His disciples meant something important. Christ then breathed on them, and thus shewed that He was the fountain of Absolution. Also the commission was bestowed just after the Resurrection, as if to remind us that Christ had therein conquered the power of sin and Satan. Moreover, as Christ was to be with us always till the end of the world, the authority then granted would continue. He then said " whose sins ye remit they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain, they are retained." (1) These words of our Master used in the present tense conferred the powers previously promised to Peter when Christ said : " Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." (2) These are expressions plainly derived from the notion of binding or releasing prisoners. Now, we should notice that our Saviour spoke words in usage among the Jews. Persons in authority were said to retain or bind a practice, if they forbade it, to loose or remit a practice, if they allowed or sanctioned it. The Apostles and their successors would clearly possess the power to exclude from communion, or admit to its reception, people whom they might believe to be worthy or unworthy, penitent or impenitent, sincere or the reverse. Such a rightful control and jurisdiction must appertain to every religious system, as in fact it must belong to every organized society. The Jewish authorities possessed it, and we can observe traces of its exercise in the Gospels. In this instance, our Lord solemnly entrusts it to His followers, and adds that in Heaven He would ratify their acts done on earth. We find in Acts 19 c. 18 v. an instance of this Apostolic remission, in the treatment of the Ephesian converts, while Peter's treatment of Simon Magus narrated in the

(1) St. John, 2 c. 22 and 23 v.

(2) St. Matthew, 16 c. 19 v.

same Book, 8th c. is an instance of retaining the sins of one not yet deemed truly penitent.

But the Lord's words must mean something more yet than a right to exclude from religious privileges. The Christian Church has understood their signification to be that Christ's servants, the Apostles, had the power to declare in His name, that the sins of a sincere penitent were surely forgiven. Also, the Church of Christ believing that her Lord abides with her, and that the Holy Spirit works in and through her ministrations, requires her clergy, in special and exceptional cases, when they have used their most careful consideration, if they believe that a sinner is repentant, to pronounce that he is absolved by God. This declaration is of course valuable, in as much as otherwise a penitent would have no distinct assurance of pardon. Men have no more power in themselves to forgive, than the Jewish Priests had to cure a leper. In fact their positions and prerogatives are in some respects analogous. Both could only, to the best of their judgment, declare that God had exercised or would exercise His cleansing power. Next, notice what was the teaching of the primitive Church. In very early times, when converts were made from Heathenism, and as yet the Church had not seen more than one generation of Christians, it was customary to speak of two repentances in the case of almost every individual. 1st that preceding baptism, assuming the person to be baptized when grown up ; 2nd the daily repentance for daily misdeeds and sins of omission, and in some cases a public profession of penitence and public discipline for grave offences. Therefore baptism was considered the 1st and great absolution. (1) The same truth is taught by our own Church. While in the Apostles' creed we speak of "forgiveness of sins," in the Nicene creed we state a little more precisely that we uphold "one baptism for the remission of sins." It is Christ's appointment

(1) Cyril Alex. teaches that remission pointed to baptism, and binding to repelling from that baptism and exclusion from communion.

that one baptised as an infant is cleansed from original sin, and if he receive that Sacrament as an adult, and is sincerely repentant, his sins of act are therein forgiven him. But in the administration of Baptism, man's action is only ministerial. He obeys Christ's injunction. He uses certain words ordained by Christ, with the element of water, but the power of grace and of remission was and is held to pertain to God alone. The second absolution was held to be conveyed through the Holy Communion. This belief is most consonant to Scripture. When this Sacrament was instituted, the Lord spoke of it as His "blood shed for the remission of sins." Whoever therefore partakes of that holy ordinance earnestly, and in faithful repentance, receives absolution from God. To those who had never lapsed into very heinous sin, this Sacrament was believed to carry remission of lesser offences. To those who were grievous sinners, but had repented, remission of graver sin was, through it, believed to be conferred. Every one can observe that this truth pervades our Communion Service, and is very definitely stated in the final collect that precedes the "Gloria in Excelsis."

The third kind of absolution was termed that of the "Administration of the Word and doctrine of God," a very ancient expression, found again in the first exhortation of our office for the Holy Communion, but which some persons have thought unmeaning. The testimonies of Scripture, its exhortations to virtue and good works, are as the key of the Word of God, and declare His terms of forgiveness. They are thus of service in preparing men for repentance and reconciliation with God.

The fourth kind of absolution consisted of intercession and prayer to God, accompanied by blessing, and generally by laying on of hands. This finds its counterpart in the forms of absolution familiar to us in our Prayer-Book. It is important to take notice that in none of these cases an application of the term absolution, was private confession held to be a necessary or even a very desirable prelude. The absolution was considered to be a ministerial, not an

absolute or personal act. The priest, as far as his human knowledge extended, acted on the belief that the penitent sinner was in favour with God. Moreover, take this special case: If any persons who had led evil lives, and had thereby been severed from communion in the Church, were undergoing penance previous to their restoration; supposing they were to all appearance at the point of death, before their period of discipline had expired, they were, as a rule, absolved and readmitted to communion. But if they happened to survive and recover, they were in old times compelled to complete their full course of penance. Till this was accomplished, the Council of Nicæa forbade all such to receive the Holy Communion, and only allowed them to be "by-standers," and join in the prayers.

This is, to my mind, a clear proof, that absolution was not regarded as a final and absolute degree. Then again: evil-doers once restored to communion, if they relapsed into sin, were not usually, in ancient times, allowed to perform a second penance. They were urged to repent in private to God, and to hope for His ultimate forgiveness. Yet no private confession was enjoined, or even permitted, a clear indication that it was not deemed of necessity. It would be a strictly correct assertion to make that, in primitive times, private confession was in most, if not all cases, sanctioned with a view to a subsequent public admission of sin, and that no absolution was granted on a mere private confession without public penance.

Then again: it is probable, to say the very least, that the form of absolution, used in ancient times, was in the shape of a prayer. To this category belong our absolution in Morning and Evening Prayer, and that found in the Communion Service. The Greek Church, the most conservative of all religious bodies, uses no other than this, the supplicatory form. And indeed, there is no certain indication of any other kind in use in Christendom till the twelfth century, when the erroneous doctrine on the subject of confession assumed a grave and definite character. But some theologians, whose

opinions deserve respect, finding as they do a declarative and indicative form in the Visitation office for the sick, and knowing the scrupulous care with which the Reformers followed ancient usages when innocent, think that the indicative form was used in private, and the supplicatory form in public. Be this correct or no, even the former is only equivalent to the statement, that as far as erring men can judge of true repentance from outward signs, a sinner is assured of God's gracious forgiveness. This form is admissible as an act of jurisdiction. It is an external act of ecclesiastical authority, which admits a person to communion, and encourages him to attend means of grace. It declares God's purpose to those who repent; it assures them that they are restored to God's gracious favour, and freed from the guilt of sin.

Bishop Wordsworth well states in his commentary, "The ministry of reconciliation, spoken of by St. Paul, 2 Cor. 5 c. 18 v., was committed by Christ to His Apostles, and to the Christian ministry after them to the end of time, and is exercised :

1. By preaching the Word: wherein they open the kingdom of Heaven by the key of knowledge.
2. In the Sacrament of Baptism: wherein they actually receive men unto God's household as by an opened door.
3. In declaring God's absolution of penitent sinners; especially in the pardon pronounced and conveyed in, and sealed by the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is a ministry, because they only apply the means instituted by God. The efficiency of their administrations is from Him Who instituted the means, and Who conveys the blessing of spiritual birth, life, health, recovery, salvation, through the means He has appointed, and by the agency of those whom He has appointed to minister them." Let us next consider what the very term absolution was held to signify with reference to the religious state of any Christian :

1st, and most commonly it meant the act which released a person from the spiritual and religious penalties attaching to excommunication.

2nd. It was applied to the declaration in God's name of the forgiveness of sins, granted by God through the ministrations of the Church. Both these views were held and taught by the ancient Church. Both are maintained and taught by the Church of England. Discipline has decayed in the Reformed Church, as it soon began to decay of old in the Church at large, but it is still in the power of any clergyman to exclude a notorious sinner from communion. Unhappily we do not find so much anxiety to come to communion as to need the exercise of discipline, and the repelling of offenders. Rather, we have to lament the large number who voluntarily cut themselves off from means of grace.

And with regard to the second meaning of the word absolution, the clergy are frequently called upon to administer God's ordinances for the remission of sins in Baptism, in the Holy Communion, and in the ordinary public services. In this last, God's pardon is sown broadcast, to take root in the kindly soil of a penitent heart.

If any one feels the burden of sin, our Church, like the Church in days gone by, calls on such to look to Christ, who is ever close to us, and in the strength of His Spirit, the heritage of all, to forswear sin and to seek for forgiveness in the Holy Communion, and in the general declaration of God's pardon. But, if there be any unusual and special difficulty—any very sore temptation—any uneasiness of conscience, which cannot be quieted by prayer and self-examination—than does our Church, as did the Ancient Church, bid the troubled soul seek comfort and counsel from some one of the clergy. All Christians would agree in this liberty. Though Christ is the only true Physician, yet we are His servants, and must strive to carry on His healing work. He is the Chief Pastor, but we have to feed His flock. Without such a mission, the pastoral office would not be what Christ meant it to be, and we must not shrink from the charge, however difficult and responsible it may be. Then, if need be, the terrors of God can be revealed. Then the treasures

of God's love and mercy can be opened out. Then advice can be given with regard to conflicting duties. Then the wounds of the fainting soul can be bound up, and the sinner can be led nearer to God. Then the wise injunction of the Prayer-Book can be followed out, and by the ministry of God's Holy Word, an earnest person sorrowing for sin may receive the benefit of absolution; the ministry of reconciliation to God, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness. If confidential advisers are found to be useful, nay even needful in the concerns of the body and the affairs of this life, they may surely at times be proved advantageous in the eternal interests of the immortal soul, and the subject of greatest moment to every unit of humanity. Were it not for this and other phases of the ministerial life, the office of a clergyman would dwindle down to the delivery of so many sermons in the course of a year, and the leading the devotions of the people. Important as such duties unquestionably are, they by no means constitute all his avocations.

But while I claim Christian liberty for all, I must not be understood even to suggest, that in order to promote spiritual progress, it is necessary or expedient for persons to be resorting frequently or periodically to their clergy for advice, or for the private imparting of difficulties and temptations. The healthier condition is for the Christian to strive to know himself by careful and frequent self-examination, and to make the ear of his Redeemer the constant recipient of his most hidden thoughts. Into that sympathetic ear we may pour our humble confessions of sin, and our yearning after a holy life. Nothing need be kept back. There can be no human infirmity on His part to mar or weaken the benefit which we can receive. To Him Who shares our nature, and knows our secrets and our infirmity, we can turn daily and hourly, and from Him we can derive purity and grace.

I will now draw all these considerations to a conclusion. I have desired to make my remarks of some value as de-

clarity, not merely of my own private and deep-seated belief, but also of the teaching of the Church in which I minister, and the doctrine of the whole Church in its earlier and purer days. This has necessitated some length, some detail, and some historical statements, likely to be dry and wearisome to many listeners. I have striven to shun even the appearance of pedantry, hasty assertion, and uncharitable spirit, and the detailed assertions are, I can assure you, not without real value to us all in these anxious times. Confession to God is a primary duty for all, as a preparation for receiving His pardon. With a view to this confession being a reality, self-examination is necessary for all. But I trust I have made clear to you, that neither among ancient Christians, nor among ourselves was or is confession to man looked upon as essential to a state of grace. The ancients equally with ourselves impress the great truth, that God is the fountain of cleansing, that to make confession to man habitual, or of vital obligation, or of great advantage or expediency, is to run clean counter to ancient faith and practice; and to bring in one point the teaching of the Reformed Church to the level of Christendom's condition, when it was tainted by malignantly corrupting influences.

We generally affix the name of Reformation to our deliverance from these evils. It would be still more correct to call it the Restoration. At that crisis, the moss and defilement and parasites which, as it were, had overspread the stately and beautiful fabric of the Church were removed and swept away; and she stood out wearing something of the fair brightness which adorned her in Apostolic days.*

I trust all will see, that the great object of the ancient plan of confession, whether public or private, was to benefit the offender and to keep abuses out of the Church. Assuming my assertions to be correct, it must be plain, that no compulsion was exercised, that no desire was manifested to exalt the priesthood, to place man in God's stead, or to limit

* See Bishop Hall's Contemplations, B. 20. 12, quoted by Blunt, on the Reformation, p. 70.

the vast and beneficent tide of God's forgiving love. I hope all will see, that men may have passed and do pass from their cradle to their last resting-place, the grave; living good lives as far as men can live, in the enjoyment of all Christian privileges and means of grace, without ever once opening their lips to a mortal man in the way of private confession or revelation of secret sin. I trust you are convinced, that to insist on the practice of confession being necessary, or even generally beneficial to the soul's health, is just as untrue, as to tell a man in the healthy vigour of early manhood, that in order to be still better, he must go through a course of very violent medical treatment. And lastly, I must plainly declare that for any English clergyman to tell his people at large, that they ought to come to confession, is most seriously to exceed lawful liberty, to incur a very great responsibility, to do that which he has no warrant from Scripture or early Church teaching, and to lay himself open in one respect to the charge of disloyalty towards the Church of which he is a minister.

